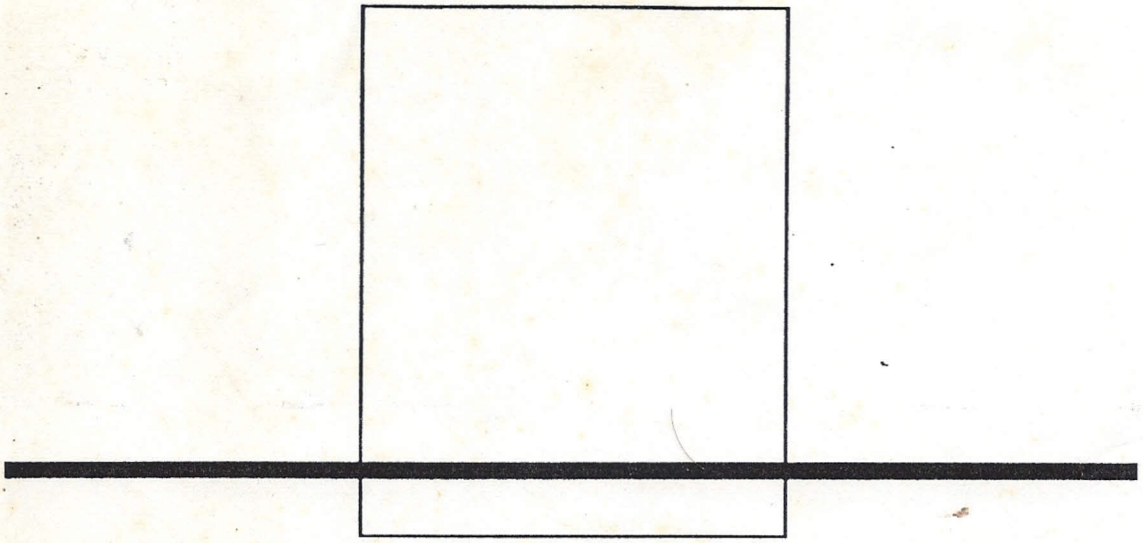

C•H•A•P•T•E•R 5

SEEING WITH A MOVIEMAKER'S EYE

The four study projects in this chapter will make you familiar with some essentials of composition, editing, script analysis, and lighting. Collectively they yield the basics of seeing with a moviemaker's eye and will be immensely useful to your confidence when you begin directing.

PROJECT 5-1: PICTURE COMPOSITION ANALYSIS

A stimulating and highly productive way to investigate composition is to do so with several other people or as a class. Though what follows is written for a study group, you can do it solo if circumstances so dictate.

Equipment Required: For static composition, a slide projector and/or an overhead projector to enlarge graphics are best but not indispensable. For dynamic composition you will need a video player, preferably with freeze-frame and slow speed scan functions. Four-head VCRs have better scan and freeze frame capability than two-head, which usually break up a static picture unrecognizably. Your monitor set can be a domestic TV receiver, but it is best to connect VCR sound (usually labeled "line out") to the auxiliary input (or "line in") socket of a hi-fi. Reproduction is better, and you won't get that infuriating waterfall roar each time you stop the player.

Object: To learn the composition of visual elements by studying how the eye reacts to a static composition and then how it handles dynamic composition, or composition in movement.

Study Materials: For static composition, a book of figurative painting reproductions (best used under an overhead projector so you have a big image to scan), or better, a dozen or more 35mm art slides, also projected as large images. Slides of Impressionist paintings are good, but the more eclectic your collection the better. For dynamic composition use any visually interesting sequences from a favorite movie on videotape, though any Eisenstein movie will be ideal.

ANALYSIS FORMAT

In a class setting it's important to keep a discussion going, but if you are working alone, notes or sketches are a good way to log what you discover. Help from books on composition is not easily gained since many texts make composition seem intimidating or formulaic, and may be difficult to apply to the moving image. Sometimes rules prevent seeing rather than promoting it, so trust your eye to see what is really there and use your own nonspecialist vocabulary to describe it.

STRATEGY FOR STUDY

If you are leading a group, you will need to explain what is wanted something like this:

> We're doing this to discover how each person's visual perception actually works. I'll put a picture up on the screen. Notice where your eye goes in the composition first, and then what course it takes when you examine the rest of the picture. After about fifteen seconds I'll ask someone to describe what path his eye followed. You don't need any special jargon, just let your responses come from the specifics of each picture. Please avoid the temptation to look for a story in the picture, or to guess what the picture is "about," even when it suggests a story.

With each new image pick a new person to comment. Since not everyone's eye responds the same way, there will be interesting discussions about the variations. There will usually be a great deal of agreement, so everyone is led to formulate ideas about visual reflexes, and about what compositional components the eye finds attractive and engrossing. It is good to start simple and graduate to more abstract images, even to completely abstract ones. Many people, relieved of the burden of deciding a picture's "subject," can begin to enjoy a Kandinsky, a Mondrian, or a Pollock for itself, without fuming over whether or not it is really art. After about an hour of pictures and discussion, encourage your group to form some compositional guidelines.

After the group has formed some ideas and gained confidence from analyzing paintings, I usually show both good and bad photos. Photography, less obviously contrived than painting, tends to be accepted less critically. This is a good way to discover just how many classical elements can be found in what appears to be a straight record of life.

Here are questions to help you formulate ways of seeing more critically. They can be applied after seeing a number of paintings or photos, or you could direct the group's attention to each question's area as it becomes relevant.

STATIC COMPOSITION

1. After your eye has taken in the whole, review its starting point. Why did it go to that point in the picture? (Common reasons: brightest point in composition, darkest place in an otherwise light composition, single area of an arresting color, significant junction of lines creating a focal point.)
2. When your eye moved away from its point of first attraction, what did it follow? (Commonly: lines, perhaps actual ones like the line of a fence or an outstretched arm, or inferred lines such as the sightline from one character looking at another. Sometimes the eye simply moves to another significant area in the composition, going from one organized area to another and jumping skittishly across the intervening disorganization.)
3. How much movement did your eye make before returning to its starting point?
4. What specifically drew your eye to each new place?
5. If you trace an imaginary line over the painting to show the route your eye took, what shape do you have? (Sometimes a circular pattern, sometimes a triangle or ellipse, but can be many shapes. Any shape at all can reveal an alternative organization that helps one see beyond the wretched and dominating idea that every picture tells a story.)
6. Are there any places along your imaginary line that seem specially charged with energy? (Often sightlines: between a Virgin's eyes and the baby's, between a guitarist's and his hand on the strings, between two field workers, one of whom is facing away.)
7. How would you characterize the compositional movement? (For example, geometrical, repetitive textures, swirling, falling inward, symmetrically divided down the middle, flowing diagonally, etc. Making a translation from one medium to another—in this case from the visual to the verbal—always helps one discover what is truly there.)
8. What parts, if any, do the following play in a particular picture:
   a. repetition
   b. parallels
   c. convergence
   d. divergence
   e. curves
   f. straight lines
   g. strong verticals
   h. strong horizontals
   i. strong diagonals
   j. textures
   k. non-naturalistic coloring
   l. light and shade
   m. human figures
9. How is depth suggested? (This is an ever-present problem for the director of photography who, if inexperienced, is liable to take what I think of as the firing squad approach: that is, placing the human subjects against a flat background and shooting them. Unless there is something to create different planes, like a wall angling away from the foreground to suggest a receding space, the screen is like a painter's canvas and looks what it really is—two-dimensional.)

10. How is the individuality and mood of the human subjects expressed? (This is commonly through facial expression and body language, of course. But more interesting are the juxtapositions the painter makes of person to person, of person to surroundings, or of people inside a total design.)
11. How is space arranged on either side of a human subject, particularly in portraits? (Usually in profiles there is lead space, that is, more space in front of the person than behind them, as if in response to our need to see what the person sees.)
12. How much headroom is given above a person, particularly in a closeup? (Sometimes the edge of a frame cuts off the top of a head, or may not show one head at all in a group shot.)
13. How often and how deliberately are people and objects placed at the margins of the picture so you have to imagine what is cut off? (By demonstrating the frame's restriction one can make the viewer's imagination supply what is beyond the edges of the "window.")

VISUAL RHYTHM: HOW DURATION AFFECTS PERCEPTION

So far I have stressed the idea of an immediate, instinctual response to the organization of an image. When one shows a series of slides without comment, one moves to a new image after sufficient time for the eye to absorb each picture. Some pictures require longer than others. For a movie audience, unless shots are held to an unusual length as in Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), this is how an audience must deal with each new shot in a film. Unlike responding to a photograph or painting, which can be studied thoughtfully and at leisure, the filmgoer must interpret within an unremitting and preordained forward movement in time. It is like reading a poster on the side of a moving bus: if the words and images cannot be assimilated in the given time, the inscription goes past without being understood. If, however, the bus is crawling in a traffic jam, you may have time to absorb and become critical or even rejecting of the poster.

There is an optimum duration for each shot to stay on the screen; this depends on the complexity of its content and form, and the accessibility of its significance, that is, how much work the viewer must do to extract the shot's authorial meaning. Shot duration is also affected by an invisible third factor, that of expectation. For the audience will either work fast at interpreting each new image, or slowly, depending on how much time the film allowed one to process the preceding shots.

This principle, in which a shot's duration is determined by content, form, significance and expectation, is called visual rhythm. As you would expect from such a musical term, a filmmaker, like a musician, can either relax or intensify a visual rhythm. There are consequences in this for both the rate of cutting, and for the tempo of camera movements.

Ideal films for the study of compositional relationships in film and visual rhythm are the classics by the Russian, Sergei Eisenstein, such as *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Que Viva Mexico* (1931–32), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944–46). His origins as a theater designer made him very aware of the impact upon an audience of musical and visual design. His sketch-

books show how carefully he designed everything in each shot, down to the costumes. More recent films with a strong sense of design are Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1956), Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), or David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986).

Designer's sketches and the comic strip are perhaps the progenitors of the storyboard (see example in Figure 6-2 in the next chapter) which is much used by ad agencies and conservative elements in the film industry to lock down what each new frame will convey. Storyboarding is particularly helpful for the inexperienced, even when your artistry is as lousy as mine and doesn't run much beyond stick figures.

DYNAMIC COMPOSITION

When images move there are more compositional principles at work. With dynamic composition a new problem emerges, for a balanced composition can become disturbingly unbalanced should someone cross the frame, or leave it altogether. Even the turn of a figure's head in the foreground may posit a new eyeline (subject-to-subject axis), which in turn demands a compositional rebalancing. Then again, zooming in from a wide shot demands reframing since compositionally there is a drastic change, even though the subject is the same.

To study dynamic composition find a visually interesting sequence, such as the chase in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), or that in William Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1971), or almost any part of Andrew Davis' *The Fugitive* (1993). Here your VCR's slow-scan facility will be very useful. See how many of these aspects you can find:

1. Reframing because the subject moved (look for a variety of camera adjustments)
2. Reframing as a consequence of something or someone entering the frame
3. Reframing in anticipation of something or someone entering the frame
4. A change in the point of focus to move attention from background to foreground, or vice versa. (This changes the texture of significant areas of the composition from hard focus to soft.)
5. Strong movement within an otherwise static composition. (How many can you find? Across frame, diagonally, from background to foreground, from foreground to background, up frame, down frame, etc. Eisenstein films are full of these compositions.)
6. How much does one feel identified with each kind of subject movement? (This is a tricky issue, but in general the nearer one is to the axis of a movement, the more subjective is one's sense of involvement.)
7. How quickly does the camera adjust to a figure who gets up and moves to another place in frame? (Usually subject movement and the camera's compositional change are synchronous. The camera move becomes clumsy should it either anticipate or lag behind the movement. Often camera movements are *motivated* by changes like this from within the composition.)
8. How often are the camera or the characters blocked (that is, choreographed) to isolate one character? What is the dramatic justification?

9. How often is the camera moved or the characters blocked so as to bring two characters back into frame? (Good camerawork, composition, and blocking is always trying to show *relatedness*. This helps to intensify meanings and ironies, and reduces obvious signification through cutting.)
10. How often is composition more or less angled down sightlines, and how often do sightlines cross the screen? (Here there is often a shifting of point of view from subjective to objective.)
11. What does the change of angle and change of composition make you feel about or toward the characters? (Probably more involved, than more objective.)
12. Find several compositions that successfully create depth and define what visual element is responsible. (An obvious one is where the camera is next to a railroad line as a train rushes up and past. Both the perspective revealed by the rails and the movement of the train create depth. In deep shots, different zones of lighting at varying distances from the camera, or zones of hard and soft focus, can also achieve this.)
13. How many shots can you find where camera position changes to include more or different background detail in order to comment upon foreground subject?

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMPOSITION

So far we have been looking at composition that is internal to each shot. Another form of compositional relationship is the momentary relationship between an outgoing shot and the next or incoming shot. This, called external composition, is a hidden part of film language; hidden because we are unaware how much it influences our judgments and expectations.

A common usage is when a character leaving the frame in the outgoing shot leads the spectator's eye to the very place in shot B where an assassin will emerge in a large and restless crowd. The eye is conducted to the right place in a busy composition.

Another example might be the framing of two complementary close shots in which two characters have an intense conversation. The compositions are similar but symmetrically opposed. In Figure 5-1 the two-shot (a) gives a good overall feel of the scene, but man and child are too far away. The close shots, (b) and (c), retain the feel of the scene but effectively cut out the dead space between them. Note that the heads are not centered: each person has lead (rhyming with "feed") space in front of his face, and this reflects their positioning in the two-shot. The man is high in the frame and looking downward, and the child lower in the frame and looking up—just as in the matching two-shot.

Other aspects will emerge if you apply the questions below to your sequences under review. Use the slow-scan facility to examine compositional relationships at the cutting point. Go backward and forward several times over each cut to be sure you miss nothing. Try these for yourself:

1. Where was your point of concentration at the end of the shot? (You can trace where your eye goes by moving your finger around the face of the monitor. Your last point in the outgoing shot is where your eye enters the composition

A B C

FIGURE 5-1

Wide shot and two complementary closeups. Notice lead space in front of each CU character, and how the height and placing in the frame of each mirrors the composition of the master shot.

of the incoming shot. Notice how shot duration determines the distance the eye travels in exploring the shot. This means that on top of what we have already established about shot length it is also a factor in external composition.)

2. What kinds of symmetry are there between complementary shots (that is, between shots designed to be intercut)?
3. What is the relationship between two different-sized shots of the same subject that are designed to be cut together? (This is a revealing one; the inexperienced camera operator usually produces medium shots and close shots of the same scene that cut together poorly because proportions and compositional placing of the subject are incompatible.)
4. Examine a match cut very slowly and see if there is any overlap. (Especially where there is relatively fast action, a match cut, to look smooth, needs about four frames of the action repeated on the incoming shot. This is because the eye does not register the first three or four frames of any new image. This built-in perceptual lag means that when you cut to the beat of music, the only way to make the cuts look in sync with the beat is to cut three or four frames *before* the actual beat point.)
5. Find visual comparisons in external composition that make a storyteller's comment (for instance, cut from a pair of eyes to car headlights approaching at night, from a dockside crane to a man feeding birds with arm outstretched, etc.).

COMPOSITION, FORM, AND FUNCTION

If form is the manner in which content is presented, then visual composition is not just embellishment but a vital element in communication. While it interests and even delights the eye, good composition is an organizing force when used to dramatize relativity and relationship, and to project ideas. Superior composition not only makes the subject (content) accessible, it heightens the viewer's perceptions and stimulates his imaginative involvement, like language from the pen of a good poet.

I believe that form follows function, and that one should first involve oneself with content before looking for the appropriate form to best communicate it. Another way of working, which comes from being more interested in language than content, is to decide on a form and then look for an appropriate subject. The difference is one of purpose and temperament. Content, form, structure, and style are analyzed in greater detail in Chapters 12–16.

So far we have looked at pictorial composition, but a film's sound track is also a composition, and critically important to a film's overall impact. The study of sound is included next in the editing study project.

PROJECT 5-2: EDITING ANALYSIS

Equipment Required: VCR as in Project 1.

Object: To produce a detailed analysis of a portion of film using standard abbreviations and terminology; to analyze the way a film is constructed; to learn the conventions of film language so they can be used confidently.